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SUBJECT: GUATEMALA-BELIZE RELATIONS IMPROVING DESPITE
MOSTLY FRUITLESS BORDER NEGOTIATIONS

REF: A. 2005 GUATEMALA 1009
[1](#)B. 2005 GUATEMALA 1813

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary. On March 23 and 24 in Antigua, Guatemala, delegates from Guatemala, Belize, and Honduras met to begin negotiating maritime boundaries in the Gulf of Honduras. Following the meeting, the parties issued a public statement expressing their satisfaction in having concluded a cordial and productive meeting. On March 30, poloff met with Ambassador Gustavo Orellana, a former foreign minister, member of Guatemala's negotiating delegation, and head of the Belize Commission. While he was mostly positive about the process, Orellana expressed Guatemala's ongoing frustration with the posture of Belize. He was, however, very positive about the state of the Guatemala-Belize bilateral relationship, which he described as "continuously improving." He reiterated the GOG's commitment to finally resolving the territorial dispute, to pursuing bilateral negotiations, and to normalizing relations with Belize. End Summary.

Background

[1](#)2. (U) The March 23-24 ministerial-level meeting began the first phase of a new stage of negotiations based on the "Agreement over a Framework for Negotiations and Confidence Building Measures" signed in Washington in September 2005. Since September, ministers from the two countries have met on several occasions, under OAS auspices, to work out the details of that plan. In a November 2005 meeting, Guatemala and Belize agreed to the OAS recommendation to address the three areas of dispute--land, insular, and maritime--separately, with the provision that no agreements on any area would enter into force until a final agreement was reached on all issues. In a February, 2006 meeting at the OAS, the Secretary General recommended the parties begin the first phase with maritime issues, on which it appeared they would make the most progress in the shortest timeframe. At that time they also resolved to include Honduras in the maritime negotiations.

[1](#)3. (U) The outcome of the March 23-24 meeting was to establish technical working groups to examine specific aspects of the maritime dispute. According to Orellana, each country has created its own working group and the three will convene in Belize City on 20-21 of April.

A difficult negotiating partner

[1](#)4. (SBU) Orellana expressed Guatemala's ongoing frustration with the Belizean posture, which he described as "rigid." Other members of the commission, who joined poloff's meeting

with Orellana, added that the Belizean negotiators required "careful handling" and that negotiating with Belize is "exhausting." They said, for example, that Belize again tried to impose unrealistically short timeframes for resolving long lists of issues. They speculated that Belize is simply "going through the motions" in order to derail bilateral negotiations and force the dispute to move to international court. They underscored the futility of that approach since, without some prior concessions from Belize, the Guatemalan Congress won't approve holding a popular referendum as required by the Guatemalan constitution.

15. (SBU) Orellana said he wanted it understood that while Guatemala's territorial demands must, for legal reasons, be presented in certain terms, the Guatemalan position is much more flexible than it appears and Guatemalan negotiators are open to creative solutions. He said that the press and public's expectations are unrealistic and emphasized that the GOG doesn't expect a sovereign nation to cede a large part of its territory.

16. (SBU) Commission members also took the opportunity to express their disappointment that the British government has not taken a more active role in resolving the dispute. They said they wished that the U.K. would use its influence to persuade Belize to adopt a more flexible negotiating position.

17. (U) Orellana said that OAS involvement has been indispensable and added that Guatemala welcomes other countries' support of the negotiating process.

Good neighbors

17. (SBU) Orellana was mostly positive and optimistic about improvements in the bilateral relationship as a result of confidence building measures undertaken in recent years, an assessment shared by other Commission members. Orellana said the two countries had agreed not to allow ongoing negotiations over the territorial dispute to stand in the way of efforts to strengthen their relationship. Nevertheless, they complained that Guatemalan citizens are not treated as well in Belize as Belizean citizens are treated in Guatemala.

18. (U) Poloff took the opportunity to follow up on recent, confused reports that two Guatemalan farmers were shot to death by Belizean authorities. Orellana confirmed that the reports were false; in fact, two Guatemalans were detained by Belizean police but have since been released. He added that these false reports are not uncommon and that the GOG has learned to respond cautiously.

19. (SBU) Comment. Members of Guatemala's Belize Commission expressed frustration and skepticism that isn't conveyed in Foreign Minister Briz's recent public statements which tend to be positive about the negotiations. While it's encouraging that the two countries have agreed on a framework and are meeting regularly, those meetings are unlikely to progress while the parties' positions remain irreconcilable. It seems unlikely that Congress would consider approving a popular referendum without at least some territorial concessions from Belize, and Belize holds fast to its commitment not to cede "even an inch" to Guatemala. Meanwhile, the two countries have made a conscious decision to relegate the dispute to a sidebar rather than allowing it to dominate their relationship. End comment.

DERHAM